By Invitation

Race in America: Diversity training

Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev explain why diversity training does not work

And suggest policies to combat bias in the workplace more effectively

Dan Williams

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Editor's note: Twelve months on from the killing of George Floyd, The

Economist *is publishing a series of articles, films, podcasts, data visualisations and guest contributions on the theme of race in America. To see them visit our hub*

AS EMPLOYERS HAVE tried in recent months to combat systemic racism in the workplace, they have reached for a go-to fix: diversity training. Every company we've heard from is using or considering it in some form. But our research suggests that diversity training fails to ameliorate either individual bias or systemic racism. Companies that want to do better should focus instead on operational changes.

Why doesn't diversity training erase bias? Biases are inscribed over a lifetime, and hundreds of studies of anti-bias training show that even the best programmes have short-lived effects on stereotypes and no discernible effect on discriminatory behaviour.

Paradoxically, training can also awaken biases. Discussing stereotypes tends to make them more salient in trainees' minds. And anti-bias messaging tends to provoke resistance in white men who feel unjustly accused of discrimination or worry that their employers' commitment to equity threatens their careers.

In addition, systemic bias is not rooted only in managers' minds. It is written into every component of our career systems, from how firms hire to how they devise layoff lists. It is evident in the common corporate practice of relegating the task of diversity management to women and people of colour, rather than making it central to every manager's job. Employers have been trying to disrupt workplace racism with diversity training since the early 1960s. Diversity Training 14.0 didn't do the trick. Version 15.0 won't either.

Instead, our research shows that the best way to disrupt biased systems is to redesign them to deliberately include people of colour.

Changing recruitment, mentoring, job-assignment, project-management, layoff and work-life systems to maximise inclusion can lead to dramatic increases in workforce diversity. Each of these systems was designed decades ago to be meritocratic for one slice of the workforce: white men who are not primary caregivers. Most of these systems informally exclude white women and people of colour. Systemic changes to employment systems may sound like castles in the air. In fact, companies such as Coca-Cola, Deloitte, Lockheed, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Xerox have already implemented various changes that, our research shows, promote diversity.

Start with recruitment. Our research shows that most employers look for new recruits at the historically white alma maters of existing managers. Those schools don't exclude people of colour today, but any company that wants top African-American and Hispanic talent should also go to historically black institutions such as Morehouse College and Hispanic-serving ones such as the University of New Mexico. Firms with recruitment programmes that do see significant increases in manager diversity after a few years. We view management diversity as the gold standard in measuring the efficacy of innovations. Lots of firms have diversified the front lines. Not nearly as many have retained and promoted people of colour.

Informal referrals are the number-one recruitment tool in many firms. Top managers, who trend white and male, refer friends and family for jobs. Formal referral incentive programmes can democratise word-of-mouth hiring, encouraging people of colour, clustered in front-line jobs and the first rungs of management, to refer candidates. Such programmes lead to increased managerial diversity.

Consider mentoring. White men from the C-suite fall over themselves offering to mentor the golden (white) boys, while women and people of colour are often left on their own. Many white men report that they feel uncomfortable offering to mentor junior women and people of colour. Firms that use formal mentoring programmes to offer every aspiring employee a mentor, with matches based on shared interest, see manager diversity rise.

Then there are the systems of assigning people to jobs. Many companies put white women and people of colour in silos, serving their own communities or doing diversity work rather than working in the core business. People working outside the core business can rise only so far: chief finance officers become CEOs; chief people officers do not. To avoid siloing white women and non-white employees, companies can consider applicants not just for jobs they apply for, but for all jobs they qualify for. Firms can also replace the hierarchical management system with intentionally diverse, self-managed teams that make decisions together. Firms organised that way tend to see growth in management diversity.

Conditioning advancement on inflexibly long hours can drive women out of the workforce. It is not just that law firms, medical practices, private-equity firms and universities expect fealty and 80-hour weeks. They can also be unforgiving of extended periods of absence, especially for employees in their mid-30s, when people are often caring for both small children and ageing parents. Any employee who decides to drop out of a corporate law firm for a couple of years, or take an extended leave from academia, will find it difficult to resume her place on the advancement ladder. Our research shows that anything companies do to help people to manage family and life challenges, such as offering flexible hours, guaranteed parental leave and childcare support, helps to keep women—particularly women of colour—in the workforce, and helps them to move up.

Ostensibly meritocratic layoff systems—whether last-in/first-out or cutting “non-vital” jobs—also evince bias, because white women and nonwhite workers cluster in both categories. Firms that use performance ratings to choose whom to let go do not haemorrhage women and people of colour, because they keep the best people from each work group regardless of tenure.

Finally, firms should institutionalise the process of systemic change by creating a diversity council or task force that includes department chiefs to examine hiring, firing, promotion, pay, layoff and quit data. Being experts in the firm itself, council members would be well equipped to brainstorm solutions. One solution might be to give legal associates who are parents more time to serve in rank before the crucial vote for promotion to partner. Another might be the targeted

hiring of black engineers. Members can take the solutions back to their units and make sure they are put into place. Diversity councils, on this model, make managers central to breaking down racial barriers. Our research shows that they are the single most effective way to increase manager diversity.

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